

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4244

INFO AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

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SECDEF WASHDC

CINCPAC HONOLULU HI

AMEMBASSY PARIS

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 8851

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, MILI, CB, US

SUBJ: JOURNALIST'S REPORT OF NEW CAMBODIAN REGIME'S WILLINGNESS
TO EXCHANGE U.S. PRISONERS

REF: BANGKOK 8506, B. VIENTIANE 3240

BEGIN SUMMARY: AMERICAN FREE-LANCE WRITER DENIS CAMERON, WHO
CAME OUT OF CAMBODIA MAY 7 ON THE LAST CONVOY FROM THE FRENCH
EMBASSY, SAID THAT TWO KHMER COMMUNIST OFFICERS TOLD HIM THAT
THEIR FORCES HOLD PRISONER A NUMBER OF AMERICAN PILOTS
AND "ADVISERS" WHOM THEY WILL EXCHANGE FOR NEEDED GOODS
ONCE THEIR NEW GOVERNMENT GETS ORGANIZED. THE TWO SAID
THEY HAD HEARD NOTHING OF JOURNALIST PRISONERS. END SUMMARY.

1. REPORTER AND LONG-TIME PHNOM PENH RESIDENT DENIS
CAMERON READ TO AN EMBASSY OFFICER HIS NOTES OF A
CONVERSATION WITH TWO KC OFFICERS CONCERNING AMERICAN
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MILITARY PRISONERS, AND THE WILLINGNESS OF THE KC TO EXCHANGE

THE PRISONERS FOR NEEDED MATERIEL. THE CONVERSATION TOOK PLACE SEVERAL DAYS BEFORE THE LAST CONVOY LEFT THE FRENCH EMBASSY TO TAKE THE REMAINING FOREIGNERS IN CAMBODIA TO THE THAI BORDER. CAMERON SAID THAT THE OFFICERS, A CAPTAIN AND A LIEUTENANT (IDENTIFIABLE BECAUSE ONE CARRIED TWO PENS AND THE OTHER ONLY ONE), WANDERED INTO THE FRENCH EMBASSY COMPOUND AND ASKED HIM WHETHER HE HAD ANYTHING ALCOHOLIC TO DRINK. USING TWO INDIAN BROTHERS AS INTERPRETERS, CAMERON ENGAGED THE PAIR IN A CONVERSATION WHICH QUICKLY DREW OVER SOME SWEDISH JOURNALISTS (REF B) AND A FREE-LANCE AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHER. CAMERON OBSERVED THAT THE TWO KC HAD APPARENTLY ALREADY HAD A LITTLE TO DRINK BUT WERE NOT AT ALL DRUNK. HE WROTE HIS NOTES IN CONSULTATION WITH HIS INTERPRETERS JUST AFTER THE KC LEFT THE COMPOUND.

2. QUESTIONED ABOUT THEIR BACKGROUNDS, THE KC SAID THAT THEY WERE BOTH 23 YEARS OLD AND CAME FROM SIEM REAP. THEY CALLED THEMSELVES KHMER RUMDOH AND SAID SIHANOUK WOULD RETURN AFTER PHNOM PENH WAS PUT BACK IN ORDER. THEY HAD FOUGHT IN MOST OF THE MAJOR BATTLES. THE TWO KC HAD EVIDENTLY FACED FANK'S 80TH BRIGADE BEFORE, AND CHARACTERIZED IT AS THE BEST UNIT ON THE GKR SIDE UNTIL THE KC DESTROYED IT IN 1973 (SIC). (COMMENT: THE 80TH SUFFERED A MAJOR DEFEAT AT THE BRIDGEHEAD NEAR OUDONG IN APRIL 1974. IT HAD PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN THE RELIEF OF KOMPONG CHAM IN SEPTEMBER 1973). THE LIEUTENANT HAD A BULLET WOUND IN THE PALM OF HIS HAND WHICH HE SAID HE GOT IN FIGHTING AT PREK PHNEOU IN MARCH 1975. THE TWO KC TOLD A FRENCH OFFICIAL WHO CHASED THEM OUT OF THE COMPOUND THAT THEY WERE PART OF THE FORCE PATROLLING THE ADJACENT CALMETTE HOSPITAL.

3. THE PAIR SPOKE ABOUT THE EVACUATION OF PHNOM PENH AND THE FATE OF GKR LEADERS. THE KC WOULD ALLOW NONE OF THE CAPITAL'S FORMER POPULATION TO RETURN EXCEPT TECHNICAL AND PROFESSIONAL PEOPLE. THE TWO KC OFFICERS SAID THEY UNDERSTOOD THAT FORMER MEMBERS OF THE GKR, INCLUDING, THEY THOUGHT, LONG BORET AND SIRIK MATAK, ARE PRISONERS IN A CAMP IN PREY VENG. THE KC WILL NOT SHOOT ANY MEMBERS OF THE FORMER REGIME (SIC). EX-GKR OFFICIALS CAN GO FREE IF THEY AGREE
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TO WORK WITH THE NEW GOVERNMENT AND ARE WILLING TO GO TO THE FIELDS. OTHERWISE THEY WILL REMAIN POLITICAL PRISONERS.

4. CAMERON, WHO HAS BEEN ACTIVE IN THE EFFORT TO TRACE JOURNALISTS MISSING IN CAMBODIA, ASKED WHETHER EITHER HAD HEARD OF ANY FOREIGN JOURNALISTS HELD PRISONER. THE REPLY WAS THAT THEY HAD NEVER SEEN OR HEARD OF ANY. THE CAPTAIN THEN MATTER-OF-FACTLY NOTED THAT SOME AMERICAN "MILITARY

PILOTS AND ADVISERS" ARE PRISONERS. HE ADDED
THAT HIS GOVERNMENT WOULD EXCHANGE THE PRISONERS FOR GOODS --
NOT DOLLARS -- WHEN IT ORGANIZED ITSELF. IF THE AMERICAN
GOVERNMENT DOES NOT ACCEPT THIS BARTER, HE CON-
TINUED, THE MEN WOULD STAY PRISONERS INDEFINITELY.
CAMERON THEN ASKED WHAT SORT OF GOODS ARE NEEDED FOR
THIS EXCHANGE. THE ANSWER, WHICH CAMERON BELIEVES
MAY HAVE BEEN HIS INTERPRETER'S COMMENT RATHER THAN THE
DIRECT REPLY OF THE KC OFFICERS, WAS THAT THEY WANT
MACHINERY, BULLDOZERS, AND FERTILIZER. THE PAIR DID NOT
KNOW HOW MANY AMERICANS ARE PRISONER NOR WHERE THEIR
PRISON CAMP IS.

5. COMMENT: CAMERON EMPHASIZED THAT THE TWO KC
ACTED AS THOUGH INFORMATION THAT THEY HOLD AMERICAN
MILITARY PRISONERS WERE A MATTER OF COMMON KNOWLEDGE. HE
DID NOT QUESTION THEM ABOUT THE SOURCE OF THEIR KNOWLEDGE
NOR THE ALLEGED KC WILLINGNESS TO RANSOM THE PRISONERS.
THE ACCESS OF THE TWO OFFICERS TO KC POW POLICY IS THUS
IN DOUBT. CAMERON SAID HE WAS INSTANTLY SENSITIVE TO THE
QUESTION OF AMERICAN PRISONERS FROM PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE AND
IS WILLING TO DO ALL HE CAN TO HELP.
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